

Report

Fort Vancouver National Historic Site

■ 1.0 Site Description

From 1825 to 1849, Fort Vancouver was the western headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company's trading operations. At the time, the fort was the center of political, cultural, and manufacturing activities in the Pacific Northwest. In 1948, Congress formed the Fort Vancouver National Monument to preserve remains of the fort as well as the adjacent Army Parade Ground. Fort Vancouver was redesignated as a National Historic Site (NHS) in 1961. As shown in Figure 1, the NHS is located near the Columbia River east of downtown Vancouver, Washington.

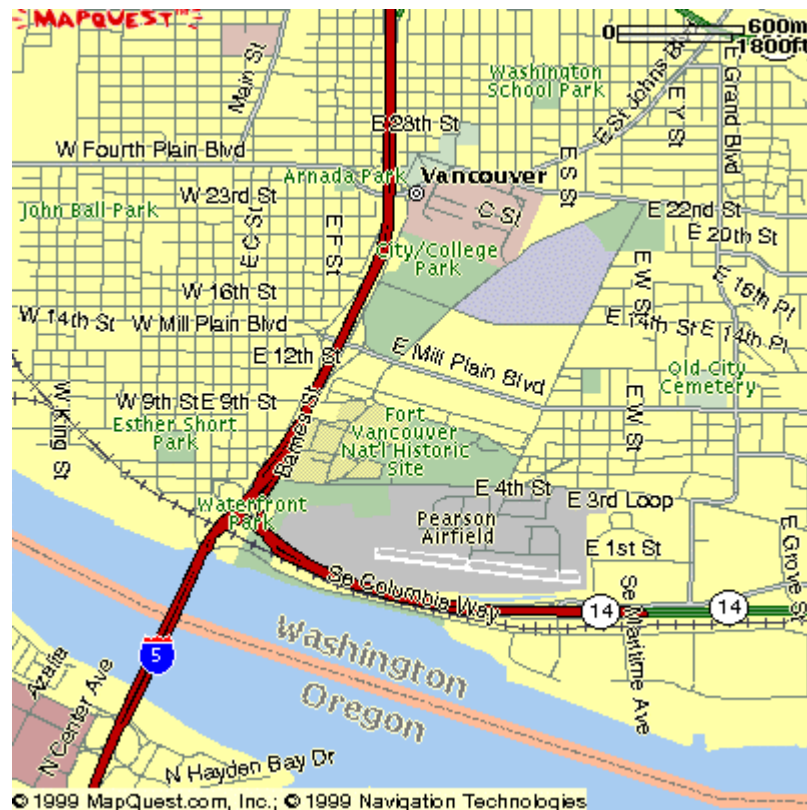
The NHS management plan is centered on three goals:

1. Protect resources;
2. Interpret the story of the Hudson's Bay Company's operations; and
3. Preserve the significance of the site's military past.

The NHS consists of the fort and its buildings, the Army Parade Ground, and a visitor center. The grounds have large grassy areas that are available for picnicking and informal leisure activities. Picnic facilities are provided throughout the grounds, but there are no camping, lodging or concession facilities on-site.

Fort Vancouver NHS is an integral part of the recently formed Vancouver National Historic Reserve. The reserve includes the NHS, Vancouver Barracks, Officers Row, Pearson Field, the Water Resources Education Center, a marine park, and portions of the Columbia River waterfront. As shown on Figure 2, all of these locations are within close proximity of each other.

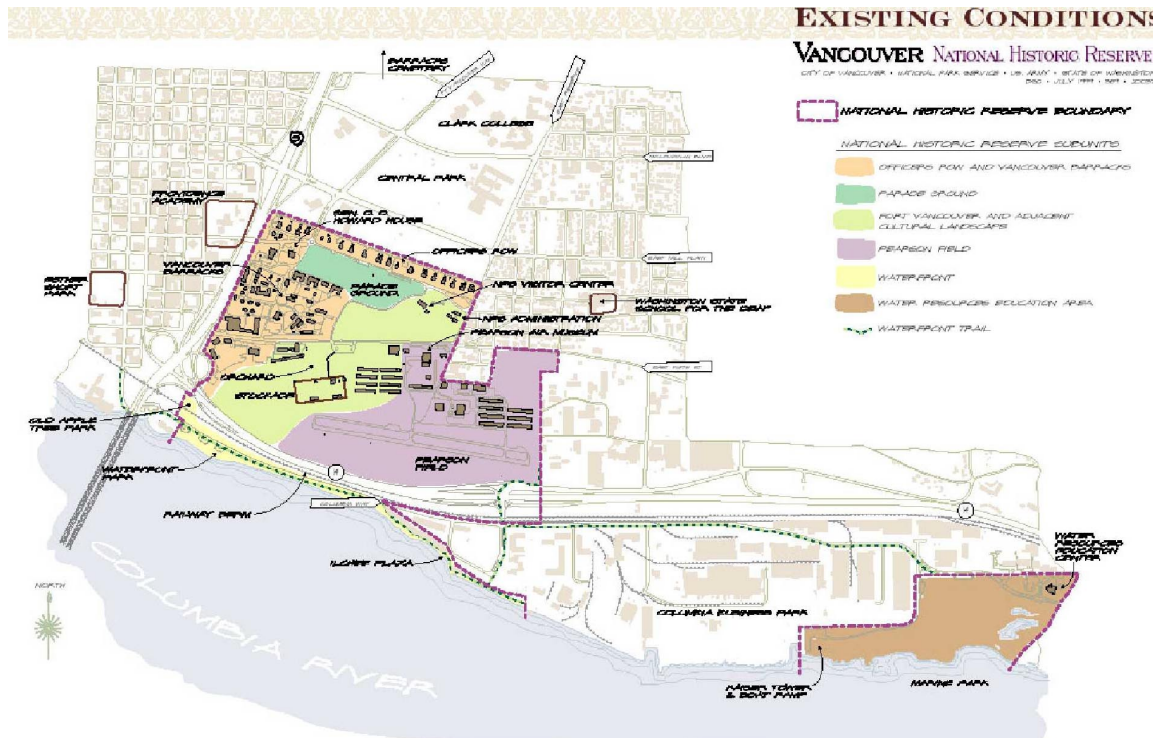
The Reserve will be managed by a partnership composed of the NPS, the Department of the Army, the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation of the State of Washington, and the City of Vancouver, Washington. These partners will continue to work closely with the Vancouver National Historic Reserve Trust. The Trust is a organization of local activists that was instrumental in Reserve formation and has been a strong advocate for fund raising and project development at the Reserve. Each agency will maintain autonomy over property under their ownership. However, the partners will more closely coordinate on planning, implementing and managing activities to achieve a shared vision of preservation, education and public use. One specific area that the partners hope to achieve is promotion of heritage tourism.

Figure 1. Location of Fort Vancouver National Historic Site

Fort Vancouver NHS had about 365,000 recreational visits in 1998, with visitation projected to increase to about 400,000 in 2000. About two-thirds of the total visitation occurs between May and August, with nearly 60,000 visitors attending Fourth of July festivities on NHS grounds. Of the total NHS visitation, about 70,000 people visited the fort and 50,000 people set foot in the visitor center. The remaining visitors used the grounds for picnicking, relaxation, and recreational activities.

About 70 percent of visitors come from Washington State or the Portland metropolitan area, and five percent from foreign countries. Most of the remaining 25 percent are from other western states. NHS management estimates that about 60 percent to 70 percent of visitors to the fort and visitor center are first-time visitors. The “typical visitor profile” was described as representative of the local population. However, the NHS gets a large number of grade-school aged visitors, accounting for about one-third of total visitation.

Within the fort area, visitors can either take a guided tour of buildings that have been restored, or participate in a self-guided walk. Except for groups, reservations are not required for the guided tours. Cultural demonstrations are available year-round in the fort. From May through September, there is a \$2.00 per person or \$4.00 per family entry fee to the fort. The visitor center, which is opened daily, has a 12-minute introductory video, an exhibit area, and a small bookstore. The NHS also hosts a number of special events, including a summer evening interpretive program and five regular annual events such as the July 4th celebration.

Figure 2. Layout of Vancouver National Historic Reserve

NHS staff estimates that the average site visitation lasts about two to three hours; there are no overnight stays at the NHS. About one-quarter of the NHS visitors go to other areas of the Reserve. The NHS is the major draw in the Vancouver National Historic Reserve.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

The NHS is adjacent to downtown Vancouver, with Interstate 5 separating the two areas. The transportation system near the NHS has similar characteristics to the downtown transportation system. These characteristics include local transit service on multiple routes, extensive bicycle and pedestrian routes, nearby access to the interstate system, and a relatively low speed local street system. The local transit service includes a stop within one-quarter mile of the NHS visitor center. Overall, the interview participants characterized the access system as “good,” with multiple travel options available to most visitors.

NHS staff estimate that about one-third of visitors to the Fort or visitor center arrive via school or tour bus, slightly under two-thirds arrive via private auto, and about two percent arrive via bicycle, transit or walking. The staff also estimates that about 80 percent of NHS visitors who use the grounds for recreation purposes arrive via private auto, while most of the rest arrive via bicycle or walking. It was noted that a significant number of people walk from downtown offices to have a picnic lunch on NHS grounds.

On-site parking was characterized as adequate, except during special events. For the July 4th celebration, the local transit operator has run a shuttle service from three outlying parking areas to the NHS. Staff estimates that about 20,000 to 30,000 people have used this shuttle service for the celebration. Due to passage of a recent ballot initiative in Washington State that will result in a funding cut of up to 40 percent for the local transit service, the NHS has been informed that this shuttle service can no longer be funded or provided by the local transit operator.

The visitor center lot holds six buses and 50 cars, while the Fort lot holds six buses and 70 cars. Parking at both locations is free. Visitors tend to drive their private auto between the visitor center and Fort, as well as to other units of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve. This propensity for private auto usage exists even though the distance between most of the major visitor activity sites is one-quarter mile or less. In spite of the close proximity of the different units, visitors tend not to experience the Reserve as one entity. The sites tend to be visited individually, with little knowledge of the related events and history of the area. Factors that contribute to this visitation pattern include the large number of private vehicles within the reserve, and the visual isolation created by Interstate 5 and a large railroad berm along the Columbia River.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

At this time, Fort Vancouver NHS does not have any specific plans, proposals, or suggestions for developing an Alternative Transportation System (ATS) or facilities that would be oriented to NHS visitors. However, since the NHS is a management partner in the Vancouver National Historic Reserve, future ATS needs for the NHS can also be viewed in terms of overall management and development proposals for the Reserve. The Draft Cooperative Management Plan (CMP) for the Reserve cites general concepts for ATS components throughout the area. In the near-term, the CMP suggests a focus on pedestrian and bicycle routes, enhanced transit access, and preparing a longer-term transportation plan. The CMP further suggests that an off-site parking facility and shuttle access system should be studied for long-term feasibility and implementation.

The bicycle and pedestrian proposal suggests expansion of current facilities to provide two interconnected loop systems that would extend into adjacent neighborhoods. A new pedestrian and bicycle bridge over State Route 14 (a limited access arterial roadway) and a railroad corridor are also proposed in order to connect the Reserve with the Columbia River waterfront. This bridge is important for NHS visitors since it would allow non-motorized access between the NHS and proposed interpretive and recreational opportunities along the waterfront.

Details for the transit access proposal were not detailed in the CMP nor known to the interview participants. The CMP suggested that expansion and coordination of transit access through the area is needed to better serve visitors to the Reserve. Service expansion may entail actions that would reduce headways that currently average between 20 and 30 minutes on weekdays. Since the bus routes that currently pass through the NHS begin or end in downtown Vancouver, coordination activities could focus on improved transfers to and from routes that serve other areas of Vancouver and Portland.

In the near-term, the most immediate transit need is to replace the Fourth of July shuttle service to the three outlying parking areas that was formerly provided by the local transit operator. As previously mentioned, this shuttle serves over 20,000 visitors to the area, and is considered crucial element in the transportation plan for the holiday festivities. The NHS is working with the local Fourth of July Committee to identify alternative funding sources for this one-day event. Although the local transit operator will not be able to provide all buses and drivers needed for this service, the NHS expects that other transit operators and school bus companies in the region would be able to assist in providing the service on a contract basis.

A comprehensive transportation study for the Reserve is suggested as a way to critically assess the feasibility of different ATS components such as remote parking and shuttle buses. The study is also suggested as a way to review proposals for closing or reducing traffic on some streets in and around the Reserve that are currently use by private autos.

The remote parking and shuttle bus proposal is currently at a pre-conceptual phase. The CMP implies that a remote parking facility could be located closer to the downtown such that it would strengthen the link between the Reserve and Downtown Vancouver. Although no operating proposals have been made, visitation patterns and operations at similar facilities suggest that frequent shuttle headways could be needed during peak visitation times.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

The Draft CMP for the Reserve is the most recent source of suggestions of potential ATS services for the Fort Vancouver NHS. The CMP cites wide approval and usage of current pedestrian and bicycle facilities as an indicator that additional facilities could be effective at encouraging non-motorized travel to and within the Reserve. The large amount of private vehicle travel through the Reserve is also cited as a detriment to the historic character and activity coordination potential in the Reserve.

A new General Management Plan (GMP) is to be completed for the NHS by the end of 2001; the current GMP was prepared in 1978. Public scoping for the new GMP is scheduled for the first quarter of 2000. It is expected that this GMP will look in detail at additional on-site hiking trails. At this point, NHS management has not given much thought to how other transportation issues might fit within the GMP.

Management at the NHS is also waiting for results from a downtown area transportation study that is being undertaken by the city of Vancouver. The scope of this city-sponsored study includes the NHS area. NHS managers stated that access and circulation issues for the NHS are closely tied to downtown transportation issues. While they are currently pleased with access between the downtown and Fort Vancouver area, NHS managers would like to see study recommendations before they suggest or initiate any new transportation initiatives that are specifically oriented to the NHS.

■ 5.0 Bibliography

Draft Cooperative Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, Vancouver National Historic Reserve, July 1999.

■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Gregg Fauth, Chief Ranger, Fort Vancouver National Historic Site